

# Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 4 Sharing a Bed with the Duke Alaric's brow twitched. Since his uncle remained unconscious and couldn't perform the bridal escort himself, someone else had to take his place. And if Elowen had been given the choice, she would have picked him without hesitation-or so he believed. He knew her tricks all too well. She claimed to admire his uncle. Claimed she wished to marry him out of sincerity. But wasn't it obvious? This was just another performance, another roundabout way to draw his attention. The Queen had likely orchestrated Leonhart's visit today for that very reason.

Worried he would refuse outright, she had sent someone to soften him up first. Leonhart, after all, had once harbored a crush on Elowen. Mostly because of the pastries she baked-but still. Regardless, Alaric had no intention of escorting Elowen from Hale Manor. A maid entered and set down warm drinks. Leonhart accepted his cup, blew gently across the surface, and took a cautious sip. When he didn't speak, Alaric frowned. "Has anyone else in the royal family done it? I don't have the time-or the interest." Leonhart blinked and looked up. "But-" Alaric shot him a sideways glance.

"What?" Leonhart swallowed, scratched the back of his head, and spoke carefully. "Her Majesty initially thought that since you're not married yet, you'd be the most suitable person to stand in for Uncle Cassian." Alaric let out a short, dry laugh. Exactly what I expected. "But," Leonhart continued, "Lady Elowen said it wouldn't be appropriate to trouble Your Highness. So Her Majesty summoned me instead. She said I could go in your stead." Alaric froze. Elowen said... she didn't want him? He had felt nothing but irritation at the thought of being dragged into her wedding arrangements.

Yet hearing that she had explicitly refused him didn't bring relief. Instead, an indistinct annoyance stirred in his chest. Leonhart watched his cousin closely and noticed the subtle shift in his expression. Trying to smooth things over, he added, "Maybe she figured you're always busy. Escorting a bride would be too much trouble. Unlike me-I've got nothing going on. I'm free every day." Alaric didn't respond. The study fell into an uncomfortable silence. Suddenly, the drink in Leonhart's hands felt unbearably hot. He shifted, then stood abruptly.

"Alaric, I still have other matters to attend to. I'll take my leave." Alaric gave a low, indifferent hum and didn't rise to see him out. Leonhart took a few steps toward the door, but something held him back. He stopped, turned around, and spoke quietly. "Alaric... about what happened back then. Elowen really wasn't at fault. You've blamed her all this time, but that isn't fair. Things have gone this far, and it's obvious you're not happy. She-" "Leonhart," Alaric cut in, his brows drawing together, his voice low and edged with warning.

"Didn't you say you had somewhere to be?" Leonhart lowered his gaze. "Yes." He swallowed the rest of his words and left the Crown Prince's Wing. ... The wedding day arrived. The first thing Elowen did upon waking was walk to the window. Sunlight poured down from a cloudless sky. The air was bright and dry-no hint of rain. She released a quiet breath of relief. It truly was a good day. She rose, washed, dressed, and sat calmly before her vanity while maids and attendants fluttered around her, preparing her from head to toe.

Perhaps because she had already lived through a wedding once before, she felt no nerves at all. Her heart was steady, composed. This was merely a formality. By the time Leonhart arrived, everything was ready. Traditionally, a bride was led out the door by one of her male relatives. But nearly all the men of Hale Manor had fallen on the battlefield. The only surviving male was a five-year-old boy. So Leonhart took on the role. As he bent to her and took her hand, cheers and laughter rose around them. Amid the noise, he lowered his voice and whispered, "Elowen...

Alaric won't be coming today." She was briefly startled. Why bring up such an ill-omened topic on her wedding day? "He's... unwell," Leonhart continued. "Ever since I returned from the palace that day, he's been sick. Still hasn't recovered. The palace ordered everyone to keep it quiet..." He seemed as though he wanted to say more. Elowen sighed softly and interrupted him. "Leonhart, I stopped caring about His Highness a long time ago. I know you mean well, but the past is the past. Eyes are meant to look forward-not back." The words lodged in Leonhart's throat.

Elowen lifted a hand and patted his arm, her voice gentle. "It's my wedding day. Let's be happy, shall we? And the next time we meet, remember to call me Aunt." Leonhart looked down, caught between an unfamiliar mix of sorrow and joy. Outside Hale Manor, the wedding procession waited-musicians playing, drums beating in celebration. The escort party from Duskmoor Manor had arrived early. This was a royal marriage, personally decreed by the King and arranged by the Queen herself. Everything was extravagant, immaculate.

Yet Elowen couldn't help feeling-perhaps it was only her imagination-that the Duke's wedding procession was far grander than the one from the Crown Prince's

Wing in her previous life. As though Duskmoor Manor had been waiting for this day for a very long time. Because the Duke remained unconscious, the ceremonial process was kept brief. After the essential rites, Elowen was led toward the bridal chamber. As they passed beneath the courtyard gate, she caught sight of the guards stationed on either side, hands resting firmly on their sword hilts.

She had heard before how strict the Duke's security was. Her father once said that the sheer number of enemies who wanted Cassian dead spoke volumes about the man he was. The bridal chamber was spacious and elegant, draped in celebratory white. In her previous life, the Crown Prince's chambers had been decorated far more modestly. After the ceremonial wine, Alaric had left her alone to entertain the guests. He never returned. She had waited in silence for hours, the heavy ceremonial crown pressing down on her head and shoulders until her neck throbbed and her breathing turned shallow.

That would not happen this time. Elowen turned her gaze to the bed. Cassian lay there, eyes closed, flat on his back. The Valebourne bloodline was known for its beauty-men and women alike. Alaric was a polished gem. Cassian was something else entirely. Sharp. Striking. Dangerous. Like a blade sheathed, power coiled and waiting. A broad-shouldered man stepped forward and bowed deeply. "My lady. I'm Bran Holt." Elowen recognized him at once-Cassian's longtime lieutenant, and now, it seemed, his caretaker. He had lost his left eye and usually wore a leather patch.

For the wedding, he had replaced it with a strip of golden silk, which looked strangely festive. Rumors about Duskmoor Manor had long circulated. Some claimed Bran was nine feet tall and fed on human flesh. Yet now, he bowed respectfully and said, "His Grace has been asleep for over half a year. He'd grown a bit thin, but otherwise, he's well. He takes his medicine every morning, and in this summer heat, we bathe him every other day." Elowen remained silent. Bran mistook her silence for hesitation and hurriedly added, "Please don't worry, my lady. I take care of everything.

There's a bed prepared for you in the chamber across the hall." Elowen shook her head. Bran grew uneasy. "Then... would you prefer to move to another courtyard?" Since the Duke had fallen into a coma, Bran had arranged many attendants. But most merely went through the motions-skiping medicine, neglecting cleanliness, convinced they could get away with it since the Duke could neither see nor speak. Once, everyone had revered the proud, brilliant Duke. Now, with him incapacitated, reverence had turned into contempt. Bran assumed a noble lady from Hale Manor would feel the same.

"There's no need to move." Elowen spoke softly, her voice calm as an early spring breeze. She looked toward the bed. "The Duke and I are husband and wife now. There is no such thing as separate beds or separate courtyards." "From tonight onward," she continued gently, "I will share a bed with him." Bran froze, eyes widening in shock. "It's getting late," Elowen said with a faint smile. "I'll go wash up and change." With that, she turned and walked away. She did not see the fingers resting at Cassian's side twitch-just slightly. admin